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# THE MORAL INFLUENCE OF WOMEN IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

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The materials for the scientific study of such questions as this are entirely wanting. Generalizations are of no scientific value unless based upon inductions from so large a number of facts as to be approximately exhaustive. Were such a collection of facts available they could not be utilized until they had been studied broadly, analyzed and classified, and reduced to system after mature and searching reflection. What I have to offer to-day is nothing more than the suggestions of one who has been an humble student of history and the political and moral sciences, sitting at the feet of such men as Professor Stubbs at Oxford and Professor Dwight at Columbia, who yet recognizes that the greatest teacher at whose feet he ever sat was a woman, whose power consisted not merely in an intellect as keen and a tongue as eloquent as ever adorned a class room, but even more in a moral purpose clear in object and fertile in resources. These are the suggestions of one who as a practicing lawyer, a busy man of affairs and a teacher in the college class room has given his chief interest to the study of human institutions. Without pretending to that scientific authority, which when only assumed is the curse and reproach of social and economic utterances, I shall merely attempt, with a few suggestive illustrations, a classification of the main forces operating in the field of investigation.

The fundamental social and political institution is the family. I can find no evidence which tends to show that it is anything less than coeval with the existence of man upon the earth. My studies lead me to believe that together with man's moral nature it is a part of the endowment of the race. Where it is found it is not an achievement of man himself, where it is wanting it has been lost by corruption and decay. In the earliest records available to us, in the recently discovered code of Hamurabi, in the book of Genesis, in the memorials of a remote past exhumed from Egyptian

tombs, in the pages of Herodotus, the family stands out a distinct and clearly conceived institution. Variations from the norm of the monogamous family appear as exceptions;—the privilege of those who have been corrupted by wealth and power, the curse of those who have been demoralized by lust. The records of antiquity embodying for us the history of those races who have possessed a notable civilization are strikingly confirmed by the first accounts we possess of our Germanic ancestors, such as that of Tacitus, and by all that we know of the family among the Teutonic peoples. The rise and spread of Christianity intensified the type, and gave to the monogamous family as established in the north of Europe upon a basis of Teutonic custom and sanctioned by the Roman culture in process of assimilation, the authority of religion.

For the purpose of our inquiry the analogies that are drawn from the debaucheries of savage tribes are as worthless as conclusions that might be based upon the celibacy of the clergy as indicating the teaching of Christ in regard to the family. These forces worked out together in the great epoch of the Protestant Reformation the social life which forms the immediate starting point of any study of the influence of women in American society.

John Knox's denunciation of the "monstrous regimen of women" calls our attention to the fact that at the historical moment when the world was breaking with the past in the Renaissance and Reformation, the reactionary tendencies were enthroned in three women, Catherine de Medici, Mary Tudor, and Mary Stuart; a fact which may well call our attention to the further probability that women are ordinarily more conservative than men and that the moral weight of woman in the home is generally exerted in the perpetuation of established practices, opinions, and beliefs.

The first emigration was largely from those elements of society which most strongly represented the reformation movement in its Calvinistic form,—the Puritans of England, the Huguenots of France, and the Reformed of Germany and the Low Countries. To these were later added in great numbers the Reformed of Scotland and Ireland. The effect of the reform movement was most strikingly seen in its political teaching of the right of man to civil liberty which wrought itself out in the great movement towards constitutional government. But it was even more profoundly felt in the social movement which carried the emancipation of a few

women of exceptional culture effected in the Renaissance downwards and established it on the broad and firm foundation of moral and spiritual equality with man and laid the basis of universal education in the labors of Luther and Melancthon in Germany and in the free schools of Geneva and Holland.

The great personality of Elizabeth impressed itself upon the imagination of the English people,—we may read it in the homely fact that Elizabeth replaced Mary as the favorite baptismal name for little maids in England. The Puritan code of morals withdrew men from places of public resort to the home circle; and the conditions of life in a new country magnified the value of woman when once she was lifted above the level of a drudge. The history of English puritanism is bright with many a portrait of beloved and honored wives and mothers. Green in one of the noblest passages that ever flowed from his pen has summarized for us the portrait of a Puritan gentleman as given us in his wife's memoirs:

"The figure of Colonel Hutchinson stands out from his wife's canvas with the grace and tenderness of a portrait of Van Dyck. She dwells on the personal beauty which distinguished his youth, . . . his artistic taste, . . . great love for music. . . . We miss, indeed, the passion of the Elizabethan time, its caprice, its largeness of feeling and sympathy, its quick pulse of delight; but on the other hand life gained in moral grandeur, in a sense of dignity of manhood, in orderliness and equable force. The temper of the Puritan gentleman was just, noble and self-controlled. The larger geniality of the age that had passed away was replaced by an intense tenderness within the narrower circle of the home. 'He was as kind a father,' says Mrs. Hutchinson of her husband, 'as dear a brother, as good a master, as faithful a friend as the world had.' The wilful and lawless passion of the renaissance made way for a manly purity. 'Neither in youth nor riper years could the most fair or enticing woman ever draw him into unnecessary familiarity or dalliance. Wise and virtuous women he loved, and delighted in all pure and holy and unblamable conversation with them, but so as never to excite scandal or temptation. Scurrilous discourse even among men he abhorred; and though he sometimes took pleasure in wit and mirth, yet that which was mixed with impurity he never could endure.' To the Puritan the wilfulness of life, in which the men of the Renaissance had reveled,

seemed unworthy of life's character and end. His aim was to attain self-command, to be master of himself, of his thought, and speech, and acts.

We catch a clear reflection in this noble picture of the woman whom such a man loved, even as she might have caught the reflection of herself as she looked into his tender eyes.

In the letters of John and Margaret Winthrop we have another portrayal of the Puritan wife and mother, and in this case of one who was one of the first American women. Let me but offer one to illustrate the very mold and fashion of the age:

*Margaret Winthrop to Her Husband*

Most Deare and Loveinge Husband,—I can not expres my love to you as I desire, in these poore livelesse lines, but I doe hartily wish you did see my harte how true and faythfull it is to you, and how much I doe desire to be allwayes with you, to injoy the sweet comfort of your presence, and those helps from you in sperituall and temperall duties which I am so unfite to performe without you. It makes me to see the want of you and wish my selfe with you, but I desire wee may be gided by God in all our wayes who is able to direct us for the best and so I will wayt upon him with patience who is all sufficient for me. I shall not need to right much to you at this time. My brother (Goslinge) can tel you any thinge by word of mouth. I prayse God we are all heare in health as you left us, and are glad to heare the same of you and all the rest of our frends at London. My mother and my selfe remember our best love to you and all the rest, our children remember theare duty to you, and thus desiringe to be remembered in your prayers I bid my good Husband god night, littell Samerwell thinkes it is time for me to goe to bed, and so I beseech the Lord to keepe you in safety and us all heare. Farwell, my sweet husband.

Your obediente wife

MARGARET WINTHROPE.

The conditions of colonial life produced a leveling up and a leveling down. A loss in all that we think of as urbane, a gain in all that we call hardy. Men and women generally responded to the opportunities afforded them in a new country. Yet the idle and the shiftless and the dissolute remained. There was material for Hawthorne's masterpiece even in Massachusetts Bay; for the story of Agnes Suriage also; but the current ran deep and strong through simple lives, finding their inspiration and their happiness in the family, its home life, its bonds of affection, its widening circuit as younger generations cut their way westward through the forest.

The familiar picture of the Puritan father is that of a man burdened with the responsibilities of life for himself and for his children. The companion piece is a mother who is a shield and a comforter, sharing the faith of her husband, but manifesting its gentler aspects; not less anxious for the moral conduct of her offspring, but more confident of the value of a ministry of love. If the picture of the Puritan father is overdrawn for the New England Calvinist and the Pennsylvania Friend, it is entirely out of character for the Huguenot and the Southern Puritan. In their portraiture must be embodied strong sociability and a delight in the life lived by sturdy men in a land where life had much work, that was well rewarded, and few cares. The wives of such men will have the *esprit* of the Huguenot woman and the cheerful delight in human life, which is one of woman's fairest graces.

Throughout the colonies and, for the greater part of their history, the wife and mother dominated the home, ruling it with a light hand and a loving sway. The home life was very simple. The home training was reduced to a narrow field of purpose. The boys were to be fitted to go forth and earn a living, setting up homes for themselves as soon as possible. The girls were trained to become housewives, taking up their mother's vocation as wife and mother.

However simple the laws of etiquette may be they are very exacting. The primitive family was doubtless insistent on the law of the family. The simple rules of conduct, the regulation of speech and of manners, fell inevitably to woman, more careful of detail in such things than man, if in the end more tolerant of results. Just in proportion as the family prospered the exertion of feminine influence may be seen. We cannot dogmatically assert that feminine influence was always the cause of the prosperity of the family, and of the well being of the community. But the force of character of many a woman has been gladly acknowledged in the biography of many a successful man, and there was feminine agitation long before the first village improvement society came to birth. We can and must mark how potent a factor feminine influence is in every vigorous family and progressive community, and that for generations it was exercised through the family in the activity of the father and the children. We must observe too that in the communities where progress has been arrested or has become retrograde that the women have lost their moral tone, have become indifferent

to their physical attractions, share the vices of the men in using tobacco and liquor, tolerate impure and profane language, and share the violent passions and cruel traits of the men. These marks I take to be characteristically decadent. Certainly in America they mark a decline from the original standard of morals, and afford us material for study in the conditions which have produced and doubtless will continue to produce a loss of intellectual and physical well being where moral purpose and moral conduct decline. That the women of such communities are frequently of very light virtue is a natural consequence of the general neglect of moral ideals, and specifically of those elements of manners which by greater refinement and restraint distinguish women from men.

I have taken an example of New England womanhood from the early pages of our history. Let me take one from the journal of Mrs. Andrew Stevenson, wife of our Ambassador to Great Britain, who wrote in October, 1839, of a Sunday evening experience.

*A Question of Cards on Sunday*

"A large party to dinner. After the gentlemen joined us, when the Duke of Sussex, Lady Durham and myself were sitting together and forming a social trio, Lord Durham came in with his imperial air and said, 'I do not know whether your Royal Highness objects to cards on Sunday evening; for myself I think there is no greater harm in playing on that night than any other.' 'Nor I,' said the Duke. 'If it is wrong to play on Sunday it is equally wrong to play on Monday or any other night.' I felt distressed. Thinks I to myself, 'What shall I do?' At that moment the Duke appealed to Lady Durham, who gave a faint assent to what he had said. I, of course was silent, when his Royal Highness, suddenly leaned forward from the immense arm-chair in which he was half buried and addressed me: 'I think my dear Madam it is considered a sin to play any game on Sunday in your country.' I replied instantly in a calm, earnest, and emphatic manner, so that, although a little deaf he did not lose a word; 'Your Royal Highness is right. We think it a violation of the commandment which bids us to keep holy the Sabbath day, and we also think it setting a bad example to our dependents, who cannot so well discern between right and wrong.' The old gentleman drew himself back in his chair and remained silent for several minutes. A solemn pause ensued and I felt almost frightened at what I had done. Still, I did not regret it. In the meantime the servants had set out the tables, but no one approached them, nor was the slightest allusion made to the subject again. The Duke did not retire until his usual hour, and continued in pleasant conversation all the evening, every now and then speaking with his usual kindness to me; and when he rose to retire he called out for

me, saying, 'Where is Mrs. Stevenson?' and when I advanced from a table where I had been looking at some drawings of Lady Mary's, he shook my hand with even more than usual cordiality as he uttered his 'Good night.' I was glad not to have offended him, for he has been very kind to us; still, I felt very grateful that I had moral courage given me at the moment to do and say what I ought, despite the fear of man."

The tremendous upheaval of the Civil War with its consequent expansion led to readjustment and rapid modification throughout the social fabric. As women had been active in the agitation which preceded the war, aggressively assailing slavery and bitterly defending it, so they proved themselves intense partisans through its long and cruel course. The lack of a distinct and characteristic feminine moral consciousness was well illustrated in the failure of the Southern women as a class to revolt against the inhumanity of slavery in general, and American slavery in particular, especially as denying to the slave woman protection in her rights as wife and mother, and as corrupting the sexual morality of the white race. It is too frequently forgotten now that the rare and horrible experience of an occasional white woman was the common lot of every black woman of any physical attractiveness for two centuries. It is a fact to be remembered not to condone the crime of to-day, but to correct and clarify our judgment in dealing with all questions where might seeks to usurp the throne of right and the laws of man, to deny the commands of God.

Out of the social reorganization no phenomenon has emerged so striking as the tendency to effect by organized effort what had previously been attempted by individual initiative and personal leadership. In this phase of social life women have played their full part. Merely to enumerate the organizations which represent their combined efforts to advance the social welfare of the country would require many pages. In village improvement societies, civic clubs, the W. C. T. U., the Y. W. C. A., and the many missionary societies, we have typical examples. We cannot do more than note a few important tendencies connected with this form of influence.

It does not necessarily antagonize or even weaken the old force of woman's home life. It calls into useful service many who were without the opportunity of exerting that force, and gives a vocation to willing but often unutilized heads and hearts and hands. Its



peril is that the larger power should become the possession of those with the least stake in society.

The general result has thus far been of enormous value to society. Coeval as it is with the great progress in woman's education, it has had wise direction, commanded a greater amount of leisure than men are ordinarily able to give to social questions, and elicited those qualities of sympathy and love which man has never sought to rival and always rejoiced to praise.

The specific character of the moral influence exerted has been identical with that once exerted exclusively in and through the family. Based upon the religious teachings of the Christian religion, it has applied the golden rule in dealing with the problems of organized charity, it has sought to maintain and safeguard the family, to limit the use of liquor, tobacco, and all injurious drugs, to check gambling and corruption, in public life.

There are indeed radical elements in the new movement, and women's organizations have not invariably taken the conservative side. The woman's suffrage movement, for example, is rooted in an idea that is antagonistic to the family, and if worked out to its logical conclusion would destroy its solidarity. There is little reason to think, however, that the future of organized social effort by the women of America will depart from its present attitude of supplementing rather than subverting woman's normal sphere, the family.

The normal always supposes the abnormal. So we find women active in the most violent anarchist clubs and free love societies, just as we find women the victims of degrading appetites and passions. As we remarked, the women among the mountain whites decadent under hard conditions, smoking cob pipes and drinking moonshine whiskey, tolerating low and profane speech and urging on their kinsfolk to perpetuate the feud, so we must observe other women corrupted by sudden wealth and the unchecked pursuit of pleasure, smoking cigarettes and drinking champagne, reading lewd literature and witnessing immoral stage plays, and figuring in sensational trials in the criminal courts. These are indeed dark shadows. They are the darker because of the sunshine that floods the picture.

We need no poetic rhapsody to give force to the final summary of the moral influence exerted in social life by American women. Perhaps it would seem sufficient to say they have fully justified the

position of intellectual equality with men which they have achieved. But they have done more than that. Always the inspiration of the home, proving by measureless devotion the strength and tenacity, as well as the winsomeness of love, they have extended their sphere to the community and given a new vitality to every ministry of help and healing.